A MEANINGFUL BUDDHIST MANTRA: THE "GREAT COMPASSION" DHARANI

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The word for a mantra embedded in a classic Mahayana Buddhist sutra is "Dharani", which means literally "that which supports". (The root "dhr" means "to hold" or "to convey".) Dharanis are strings of sounds that are deemed to be sacred and powerful as in a magic spell, and as long as these are recited accurately their semantic value is secondary – if relevant at all. (Thus, a dharani might be used to open the mouth of a hungry ghost to receive an offering of food.) This explains why the original Indic language in which they were composed has been phonetically transliterated by "foreign" redactors rather than translated – into Tibetan and Chinese (and thence to Japanese) in particular. Thus, in the "new" language of the sutra they appear to the reader as blocks of pure sound without sense. To establish any semantic meaning in English the original Indian text (probably, but not necessarily in Sanskrit) would have to be restored from the transcribed syllables in the "foreign" language, since the demise of Buddhism in India after its transmission northwards makes their recovery otherwise impossible. In the absence of such a authoritative restoration any Chinese, Japanese or Tibetan commentator's "translation" is likely to be largely fanciful, simply providing a starting-point for the favourite doctrines of their own particular sect. Even an accurate restoration of the original Sanskrit text would not guarantee a surd translation: as in the case of any magic spell, words may be reduced to gibberish by frequent unintelligent repetition. . . . . There is one promising exception to this rule: the **Great Compassion Mantra**, still a popular mantra in East Asia. (Sanskrit: **Nilakantha Dharani** or **Maha Karuna Dharani**; Chinese: **Dabei Zhou**; Vietnamese: **Chu dai bi**.) According to the "Mahakarunikacitta Sutra" it was spoken by the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara before an assembly of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, devas and kings. The twelve scrolls of a Chinese transcription known as the "Nilakantha Lokesvara" (literally "blue-necked lord of the world") found in the Dunhuang cave along the Silk Road attest to its widespread popularity. It was transliterated into Chinese no less than seven times over the 7^{th} – 8^{th} centuries and again in the 14^{th} century C.E. The most widely accepted version today is that by Amoghavajra (worked 723-774), himself the disciple of another transliterator of the text into Chinese Vajrabodhi (worked 719-741). Amoghavajra's version in the "Chinese Tripitaka" has particular interest since it was transliterated by him using the Siddham (ie. Sanskrit) script alongside the version in Chinese characters. . . . . Another version by Chih-t'ung (or Zhitong) transcribed during 627-649 can be found in the "Ming Tripitaka". It is rarely mentioned in the Mahayana tradition. However, for those seeking to make a semantically satisfactory English translation of the Mantra, this version takes on a particular significance since it formed the basis of a remarkable effort at reconstruction of the Sanskrit text undertaken in the 18^{th} century. Rol-pahi Rdorje was commissioned to collect together all the Sanskrit dharani texts in a quadrilingual publication the aim of which was to restore Sanskrit texts with help of Tibetan transliterations. This he did with the "Nilakantha Dharani" as transcribed by Chih-t'ung. (See Lokesh Chandra: 5.1290-6.1304 in "Sanskrit Texts from the Imperial Palace at Peking" Parts 1-22. New Delhi 1968-1977. International Academy of Indian Culture.) The latter's version is longer than that of Amoghavajra (by a process of accretion?), but the two taken together provide us with the best chance we have of establishing an original Sanskrit dharani text, which is otherwise corrupt beyond recognition in certain cases. Lokesh Chandra has undertaken this. . . . . .

Lokesh Chandra's version of Amoghavajra emended with reference to Chih-t'ung is transcribed below – in spelling adapted for English readers and cantors. Since this is the version in most common continuing use I deem it a meritorious task to rescue this particular version from obscurantism. . . . . Pronunciation for English-speakers: **a** as in "cat"; **a:** as in "father"; **tt** habitual English rather than American pronunciation of the letter "t"; **u** as vowel in "foot"; **ar** as in "caramel"; **r** never as English "ər" or antecedent-vowel lengthener; **sh** English pronunciation as in "shoot"; i: as in "knee"; **th** pronounced "t-h" and not as one sound-unit (as in English); **θ** as in English/Greek "thorough/theta"; **u:** as in "boot".

All discrete sense units have been capitalised for mindful semantically-aware chanting.

Namo Ratna-traya:ya
Nama A:rya:valokiteshvara:ya Bodhisattva:ya
Maha:sattva:ya Maha:ka:runika:ya Om
Sarva-bhaya-shodhana:ya Tasya Namaskrtva: Imu A:rya:valokiteshvara Tava
Namo Ni:lakantha
Hrdayam Vartayishya:mi Sarva:rθa-sa:dhanam Shubham
Ajeyam Sarva-bhu:ta:na:m Bhava-ma:rga-vishodhakam
Tadyaθa: Om
A:loka:dhpati Loka:tikra:nta
Ehy-ehi Maha:bodhisattva Sarpa-sarpa
Smara Smara Hrdayam
Kuru-kuru Karma
Dhuru-dhuru Vijayate Maha:vijayate
Dhara-dhara Dha:rini:-ra:ja
Cala-cala Mama Vimala-mu:rtte,
Ehi-ehi Chinda-chinda
Arsa Prakali
Visham-visham Pranashaya
Hulu-hulu Smara Hulu-hulu
Sara-sara Siri-siri Suru-suru
Bodhiya-bodhiya Bodhaya-bodhaya
Maiitriya Ni:lakantha Dei Me Darsanam
Prahara:yama:na:ya Sva:ha:
Siddha:ya Sva:ha:
Maha:siddha:ya Sva:ha:
Siddhayogi:avara:ya Sva:ha:
Ni:lakantha:ya Sva:ha:
Vara:ha-mukha:ya Sva:ha:
Narasinha-mukha:ya Sva:ha:
Gada:-hasta:ya Sva:ha:
Cakra-hasta:ya Sva:ha:
Padma-hasta:ya Sva:ha:
Sankha-hasta:ya, Sva:ha:
Ni:lakantha-pa:ndara:ya Sva:ha:
Maha:tali-Shankara:ya Sva:ha:,
Namo Ratna-traya:ya
Nama A:rya:valokiteshvara:ya
Bodhisattva:ya Sva:ha:

INTERLINEAR TRANSLATION

Namo ratna-trayaya. Nama Aryavalokiteshvaraya Bodhisattvaya,

Adoration to the triple gem. Adoration to the noble Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva,

mahasattvaya, mahakarunikaya. Om:

the great sentient being; the great body of compassion. In reverence:

sarva-bhaya-shodhanaya tasya namaskrtva imu, aryavalokiteshvara,

having paid adoration to one who dispels all fears, O noble lord of the observed world,

tava namo, nilakantha – hrdayam

– to you adoration O unharmed swallower of poison – the heart dharani

vartayishyami sarvartha-sadhanam, shubham ajeyam sarva-bhutanam,

I shall enunciate which ensures all purposes, is pure and invincible for all beings,

bhava-marga-vishodhakam. Tadyatha om:

and which purifies the path of existence. Thus – in reverence:

alokadhpati, lokatikranta, ehi-ehi mahabodhisattva;

O lord of effulgence, the world-transcending one, come, come, great bodhisattva;

sarpa-sarpa, smara-smara hrdayam. Kuru-kuru karma;

Descend, descend; bear in mind, bear in mind my heart-dharani. Do, do the work;

dhuru-dhuru vijayate, mahavijayate. Dhara-dhara, dharini-raja.

hold fast, hold fast O victor, O great victor. Hold on, hold on, O lord of the dharani.

Cala-cala, mama vimala-murtte; ehi-ehi;

Move, move, O my immaculate image; come, come;

chinda-chinda. Arsa prakali! Visham-visham pranashaya! Hulu-hulu;

hear, hear. A joy springs up in me! Poison – poison destroy! Quick, quick;

smara; hulu-hulu; sara-sara; siri-siri;

bear in mind; quick, quick; descend, descend; descend, descend;

Suru-suru. Bodhiya-bodhiya, bodhaya-bodhaya.

descend, descend. Being enlightened, being enlightened, enlighten me, enlighten me.

Maiitriya nilakantha dei me darsanam. Praharayamanaya, svaha!

O merciful blue-necked one, appear unto me. To you who gazes upon us, hail!

Siddhaya, svaha! Mahasiddhaya, svaha!

To the one who has attained mastery, hail! To the great master, hail!

Siddhayogiavaraya svaha! Nilakanthaya, svaha! Varaha-mukhaya,

To the great master of yoga, hail! To the blue-necked one, hail! To the boar-faced one,

svaha! Narasinha-mukhaya, svaha! Gada-hastaya, svaha!

hail! To the lion-headed one, hail! To the one who bears the mace in his hand, hail!

Cakra-hastaya, svaha! Padma-hastaya, svaha!

To the one who holds a discus in his hand, hail! To the one who holds a lotus, hail!

Sankha-hataya, svaha! Nilakantha

To the one who bears a conch in his hand, hail! To the poison-swallower

pandaraya, svaha! Mahatali-hankaraya,

smeared with ashes, hail! To the mighty possessor of virtue and supernatural power,

svaha! Namo ratna-trayaya. Nama aryavalokiteshvaraya.

hail! Adoration to the triple gem. Adoration to the noble lord of the observed world.

Bodhisattvaya, svaha!

To the sentiently awakened one, hail!

Allusion is here made to the iconography of Vishnu and the ash-smeared devotees of Shiva. The Dharani was probably in origin a hymn to a Spiritual Principle seen as transcending both gods and of which they were both seen as manifestations. This perspective appealed to Buddhists and enabled the mantra to survive with much of its meaning intact in a Buddhist context. The attributes were then assimilated to the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Nilakantha may be taken as a proper noun; the Vishnu-avatar's salvific role of swallowing poison, thereby turning his neck blue, is emphasised here – a suitable image for the salutary effect of right-minded recitation.

Dedicated to the sustentation in rebirth of the late Robert Medhurst 1944–2012